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CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN

STRUCTURE AND FLOW WORKS FROM 1950 - 1980



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I have always had a great affection for the mavericks of the art world, those artists whose passion to create simply overrode the conventional expectations of an era. Claire Falkenstein is just such a maverick and it gives me great pleasure to present this exhibition of her work. In studying her oeuvre, demonstrated in piece after piece, I marvel at her sure-footed creative audacity, the remarkable variety in her body of work and her genius for unaffected re-invention. I am amazed that she had the courage to re-locate to Paris in 1950 and consequently win over the European elite. I am equally impressed by her utter mastery and fearlessness regarding the use of technical crafts to realize her scrupulously humane and elegant vision. She seems an unfailingly natural craftsperson, immune to conventional wisdom but entirely true to her creative instincts. If ever an artist deserved the term experimental, it was Claire Falkenstein. In this the first in a series of exhibitions, I have chosen to look at the latter section of her career. This period celebrates her deft experimentation with materials and forms, giving rise to an extraordinary series of sculptures. Though long held in high esteem by critics, and not entirely unknown to those of us in Southern California, Falkenstein is not your household name variety of artist. Given the superb quality and abundant heart of this work, I have great hope of beginning to rectify that with this exhibition. First and foremost I want to thank Hal Nelson, Director of the Long Beach Museum of Art and President of the Falkenstein Foundation, for his tireless support and guidance on this project. His genuine passion for this project and for the work itself have impressed and helped me greatly.

her generous assistance.

I want also to add an especially heartfelt thank you to our catalogue and exhibition manager Tamara Devrient. Without her professionalism, drive and devotion this publication simply could not have been realized. We are most fortunate to have secured her participation in this endeavor.

without them.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Maren Henderson, in addition to providing a plainspoken yet keen-eyed text, has been an invaluable source of information. Her deep understanding of the artist's work and of the artist herself has been an inspiration to us all. We are truly indebted to her for

Finally, as ever, I extend my profound gratitude to my staff Marie Chambers, Debbie Stern and Jennifer Ward. I could not do it

# STRUCTURE AND FLOW BY MAREN HENDERSON



Claire Falkenstein welding, Rome, circa 1960

Claire Falkenstein, San Francisco, circa 1940

Claire Falkenstein working on "Point as A Set" Series, circa 1965 In an interview regarding her work of the 1950s, Claire Falkenstein said "I never used the word 'sculpture' but the word 'structure'."<sup>1</sup> She had of course, used the word 'sculpture' throughout her career but preferred 'structure' and increasingly used it in reference to most categories of her work including many paintings and an entire series of prints.

Challenging definitions all along the way, Claire Falkenstein was forever exploring new territory and impatient with the familiar. She ignored conventions, blurred categories, and became one of the most prolific and versatile artists of her time. She produced work from the age of 20 through most of her last year at age 89, from her first solo exhibition in 1930 and through the last in 1997. She worked virtually every day whether on trains, in airport terminals, waiting rooms, and even in hospital beds. At age 80, Falkenstein started yet another studio, specifically for new projects. At age 89, retirement was still unthinkable.

To describe her simply as 'versatile' would be a crime of understatement. It is unusual for an artist to be sculptor and painter, printmaker and designer, and achieve true distinction in all categories. (Calder and Noguchi can be cited.) But then, she broke down the boundaries between these categories, using the materials and structural systems of her paintings and sculptures in the creation of gates, windows, fountains, and jewelry -- as well as in her prints and even in her short films.

Her work is testimony to the ascent of material and process over a definitive form (or object or image). Material was not used to create a form: it was the form. Structure wasn't used to create an object or image: it became the object. From the early 1940s, Falkenstein's work had become almost entirely abstract with no reference to anything outside the work; and it consistently maintained a sharp focus on experiment and the invention of structures.

The artist clearly reveled in the technical aspects of her work. Often of a tedious nature, the procedures were repetitive and difficult. She was a natural and expert technician and yet held a clear contempt for technique devoid of expression. Expressive content -- that elusive quality -- in her case, derived directly from the character of her raw materials and the processes involved in working them. The resultant structures are obvious in their construction and expressive in every way: in the logic of the structural system involved, in the rawness of the material, its color and nature, the joins, the hammer marks, and the inevitable stains from welding and burning.



Claire Falkenstein was born in North Bend, Oregon, in 1908<sup>2</sup>, and grew up in circumstances far from any art center. Entering the University of California at Berkeley, she had no intention of studying art. It quickly became her passion however, and when she graduated in 1930, she held a major in art with minors in both anthropology and philosophy. Rare in the annals of the art world, the new graduate promptly received a solo exhibition of her drawings at the East-West Gallery in San Francisco. She enjoyed a quick entrée into the professional art world of that city. To support herself and set up a studio, Falkenstein taught art classes in various venues in the Bay Area including UC Berkeley Extension, Mills College, the California Labor School and, from 1948-50, the California School of Fine Arts.

Falkenstein's career subdivides into three distinct phases associated with three quite different cities: San Francisco in the 1930s and 40s; Paris from 1950 to 1963; and Los Angeles for the rest of her life. After her college years, she continued to learn, teaching herself for the most part. One master class with Alexander Archipenko was interesting to her, but more important was meeting Moholy-Nagy and Gyorgy Kepes and other art world luminaries who came to the Bay Area on occasion to lecture, exhibit, or teach. It was in San Francisco that she accomplished her early experiments and realized her first professional successes in exhibitions, critical reviews, and awards.

The move to Paris in 1950 was full of risk. Breaking family and professional ties, leaving behind a solid reputation, she traveled halfway around the world. It wasn't a choice but a necessary relocation. Her work was becoming sterile, as she said, in addition to the fact that she had "won all the awards". In Paris the direction of her experiments continued, leading her to further innovation, and though seeming unfocused, it was in fact quite the opposite. It was focused, definitive, and would result in a large body of works of impressive originality and variety. Here she received significant critical attention and the opportunity to exhibit in venues throughout Europe.

International recognition continued throughout the rest of her life in Los Angeles where she enjoyed a demanding exhibition schedule, many monumental public commissions, and further critical acclaim -- all while she continued to break new ground.

## PARIS IN THE 1950S

In Paris in 1950, World War II had been over for five years, but just barely. Housing was at a premium as were materials of all kinds. In a cramped studio and with limited funds, Falkenstein could not afford stone for carving or bronze for casting -- the traditional materials of fine art sculpture; but, from a lumber yard or hardware store, she could buy more prosaic materials such as a wooden log, stovepipe wire, paint, and even bars of lead. And she did.

Humble stovepipe wire, originally a budget compromise, became a source of endless experiment. Wire, distinctively linear, became a key aesthetic in Falkenstein's work. But then, in ways, this aesthetic always had been. Whether working in two dimensions or three, in painting or sculpture, she said "Everything is drawing. Sculpture is drawing."<sup>3</sup>

Wire, a very simple material after all, held considerable potential as Falkenstein proved again and again through the years. She twisted wire, flattened it, welded it, painted it, and perpetually tested it to see what it could do. She even ran it through a printing press. It became basic to her formal vocabulary albeit with considerable range in size from fine wires to metal rods of all thicknesses to large scale copper tubing and, in a striking variation, even tree trunks.<sup>4</sup>



#### THE SIGN

flow of space and light.

A loop of wire or metal strap appeared in various works from the 1940s on. It was only later that Falkenstein, in conversation with her friend Mark Tobey, recognized this as a generating idea in her work and termed it "the sign". Portentous sounding it was not. It was a beguilingly simple, formal element -- not much more than a mark on a page or a fragment of wire. Not an end, it was raw material. There was nothing mystical about "the sign". It had no literal or symbolic meaning. Falkenstein insisted "It has no reference to anything, anything, anything in nature. It's a new kind of alphabet." 5

AND THE ENSEMBLE Unconscious at first, the "sign" developed from a simple, linear element into use as a module which, by multiplication and linked by hundreds of individual welds, developed into what Falkenstein termed an "ensemble". These aggregates took on strength and scale and became structures, some on a truly monumental, even architectural, scale. The structures had no surfaces in the conventional sense of a continuous envelope. These ranged from dense and prickly masses (as in the *Point as a Set* series) to delicately extended membranes (as in certain of the Suns). Some appear impenetrable while others are effectively transparent. The structures were varied in density but all were essentially open, allowing the

They were capable of many sizes, shapes, and densities. The structures could be manipulated like materials in their own right -- able to take on any shape, realize any idea, and used in every possible creative area, including painting and printmaking. Furthermore, the structures were used to make functional objects such as windows, gates, and fountains.

Integrating Rectangle (1957) is a structure based on the sign of the rectangle and the ensemble. It is the first time Falkenstein used this system as a conscious strategy, pointing out that the whole composition was a rectangle as was each unit. It is truly a field created by thin wire rectangles in an aggregate structure permeated with space. Falkenstein was insistent that we "see the space", often admonishing viewers that the work was a "composition of interstices". Perceived that way, Integrating Rectangle is essentially a space laced through with fine wiry 'signs'.

The decision to remain in Paris, even though unintended (she had originally planned to move to New York City), was a wise strategy and fortuitous in many ways. Falkenstein soon became part of the avant-garde in Paris, which was no small accomplishment in such a competitive atmosphere -- filled as Paris was with monumental achievements in art and the equally monumental personalities of early modernism. Here Falkenstein became part of a circle of European artists including Jean Arp, Alberto Giacometti, Karel Appel, Georges Mathieu, and Antoni Tàpies. Added to this heady company were the burgeoning ranks of American artists, soon to be known as "Les Américains à Paris".

Her work, however, always stood apart. One of the first to appreciate its independence and daring was the renowned French critic, Michel Tapié. He associated Falkenstein's work with art autre<sup>6</sup>, a particularly radical new direction underway in Paris at the time, strongly conceptual and even more strongly experimental in character. Art autre was pointedly a rejection of Cubism, its legion adherents and, of more concern, the incessant "outbursts of post-Cubism". Michel Tapié wrote that "sculpturales absolument autre" were so rare that these existed only in the work of some four or five artists, and Falkenstein was one of them. 7

#### STRUCTURE AND FLOW

Through the years, Falkenstein developed several distinctive structural systems, which became her personal, formal vocabulary. These included the lattice structure, the sign and ensemble, the set structure, the screen structure, and eventually her truss structure and topological structure. Although she produced an extensive oeuvre which was daunting in its variety, virtually all of her works from the fifties and on were based to some degree on these systems.

### THE FUSIONS: WELDING METAL AND MELTING GLASS

Working on projects in Italy in the 1950s, Falkenstein began to experiment with inserting chunks of colored glass into her structures. This experiment led to further integration of these two unlike materials and resulted in her famous "Fusions", a relatively extensive body of work. These unique sculptures are based on the principle of structure and flow, and perhaps its most vivid realization: as the glass cools, the process becomes fixed and visible.

A compelling contrast, the Fusions combine the drabness of her dark tangles of iron with the colorful translucencies of the glass. Falkenstein spoke of teaching herself regarding the properties of these two materials, especially the problems of heating and cooling. There are different temperatures necessary for welding metal and for melting glass as well as different cooling rates. What began as experiment, concluded with an impressive series of works exhibiting mastery of the process albeit always with the element of chance factored in. The metal network is determined by the artist. The glass, by contrast, is not a foregone conclusion and, at high temperatures, it becomes fluid and amorphous as it collapses through the structure.

# STRUCTURE AND FLOW #2: SCULPTURED WATER

Also known as the *Cal Fed Fountain*, this is 'sculpture and flow' at just about its most monumental. Here the water is the unstable, amorphous component. The metal structure was a powerful network built up from the 'sign of the U'. It was based on Falkenstein's *Point as a Set* series but, "exploded" as the artist said. Falkenstein had been experimenting with combining sculpture and water but was determined not to use water just as a setting for the sculpture as is traditional. She hoped to bring water into full expression as a sculptural medium, intending that it operate as an integral part of the sculpture and not just to provide a pleasing ambience. In the *Cal Fed Fountain*, the composition of copper tubing took on new meaning: it became more than pure form in that it became the conduit system, directing the streams of water and to a degree, determining their trajectories until they came raining down on the structure. The aesthetics and the mechanics were one and the same as were function and form. Falkenstein wrote to the curator at the Guggenheim: "Excuse me for going on about it, but it is so beautiful when the water courses through the structure that I can hardly stand it." This system became the matrix for a series of fountains.

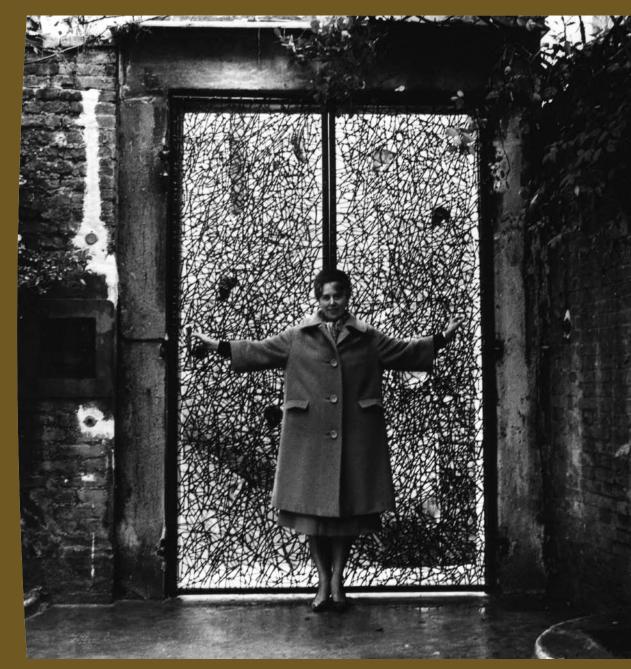
#### MOVING POINT

The idea of *The Moving Point* idea began as a drawing on the train from Paris to Rome in 1959. As she explained, one point becomes two points and then three and four points, and they eventually become a surface. She thought of this in terms of a dynamic process and even as "a biological phenomenon". It is one of her systems in which a basic unit, developed by an aggregate process into a structure, is combined with improvisation and chance.



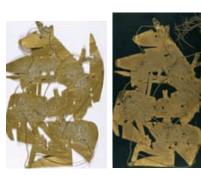
"Structure and Flow #2 (Wave)", detail, California Federal Savings and Loan, Los Angeles, 1965





Claire Falkenstein in front of her creation, the gates for the Palazzo Venier dei Leoni, commissioned by Peggy Guggenheim, Venice, Italy, 1961

Maren Henderson received a Ph.D. in art history from UCLA with the work of Claire Falkenstein as her dissertation topic. She is currently a professor of Art History and Coordinator of the Art History Program at Cal Poly University in Pomona. Prior to her present appointment, she served the university as Chair of the Art Department for the College of Environmental Design. In addition to articles on digital art, functional art and industrial design, Ms. Henderson has written extensively on the work of Claire Falkenstein.



Objet gravure, undated brass plates 27 x 19 inches 68.6 x 48.3 centimeters

27 x 19 inches 68.6 x 48.3 centimeters

Sruttura Grafica, undated graphic structure on paper, print

that push.

<sup>1</sup> Claire Falkenstein, interviewed by Herb Caen, "Herb Caen," San Francisco Chronicle, Sect. CCCCAAA, Sun. July 27, 1958.

- <sup>2</sup> Falkenstein's birth certificate notes the date of her birth as July 22, 1908 in North Bend, Oregon, in Coos County.
- <sup>3</sup> Personal conversation with the artist. 4 April 1988.
- <sup>4</sup> Falkenstein used heavy copper tubing for her large fountains. She used cedar logs for a monumental structure, The Forum, at Cal State Dominguez Hills.
- <sup>5</sup> Personal conversation with the artist. 1 March 1988
- <sup>6</sup> In 1952, Tapié held an exhibition and wrote a catalog, both titled Un art autre.
- The term was associated with art informel, another term introduced by Michel Tapié.
- The latter was used in regard to the work of Riopelle, Dubuffet, and Fautrier among others.
- <sup>7</sup> "(Telle) est l'oeuvre actuelle de quelque quatre ou cinq artistes, et Claire Falkenstein est de ceux-là." Michel Tapié, Claire Falkenstein, (Paris: Galerie Rive Droite Jan 1956). n. pag.

Falkenstein's moving point was like a Chinese character and applied with a similar emphasis on gesture and the resultant calligraphic mark. It was clearly a dab of the brush with a head and a tail, calculated but extemporaneous. And like a comet, the 'point' began streaking across space, the sequences recording the trajectories, accumulating into networks, and ultimately establishing lively, animated surfaces.

# STRUTTURA GRAFICA

Both in the U.S. and in Europe, Falkenstein continued to make prints. Printmaking is a distinct category in the arts with its own demands, its specialized equipment and skills.

Again, Falkenstein mostly taught herself and then, by those very credentials, proceeded to ignore many of the conventions. She laminated metal plates with wires in low relief compositions, intended for printing but which were technically sculptures in their own right. She called these objets gravures. The artist inked these with her own hands and ran them through the press. She was effectively forcing the paper to the point where it frequently broke as did, allegedly, one of the presses. The print studios, she later confessed, hated to see her come and were glad to see her go. But she remained fascinated with the process, producing many editions of prints, as it became one of the most fertile areas of experiment.

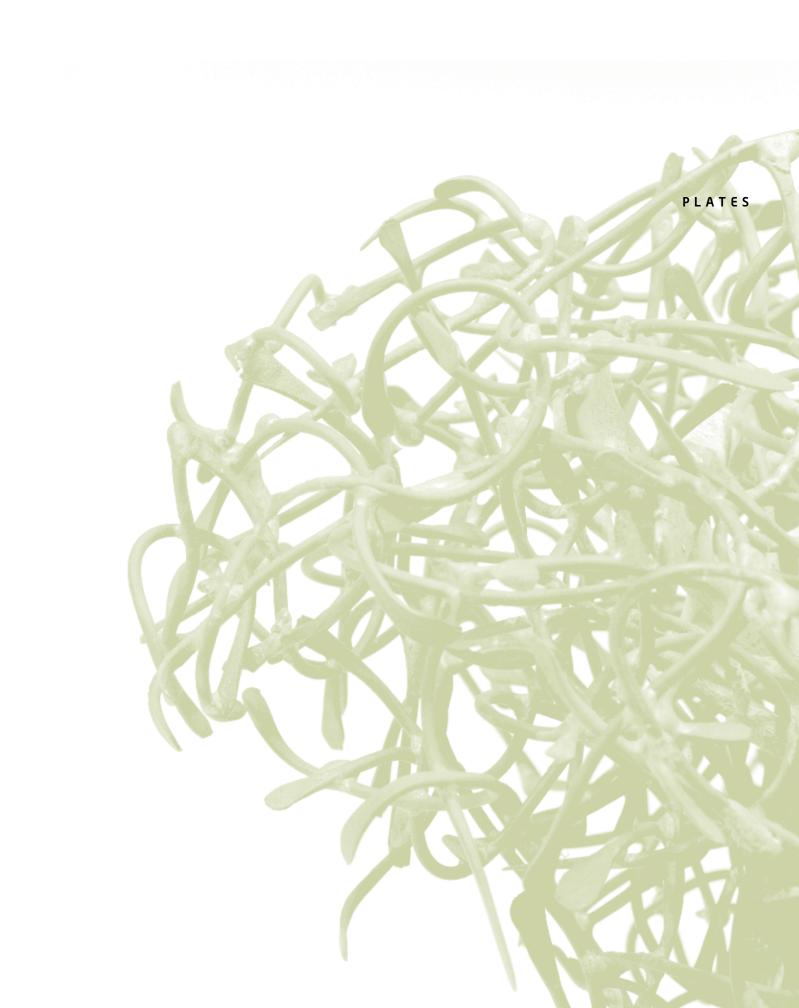
# UNPREDICTABLE PROCESS

"Unpredictable process" was a phrase Falkenstein used to describe her work, and she purposively used various techniques, all incorporating chance and the fortuitous accident. She was interested in what a material would do and what it would not; how far she could push it and what could be realized from

Falkenstein's work is not easily comprehensible. With so many others of her generation including the Abstract Expressionist painters, the work was often based on one big idea and endless permutations. Falkenstein differed in that she was interested in many materials and processes -- and her basic method was continuous experiment. Her work was deeply frustrating to dealers and to collectors because, by the time they understood what she was doing and a market for recent work developed, she was on to a new investigation -- a new idea, a new material, and as many techniques as she could discover.

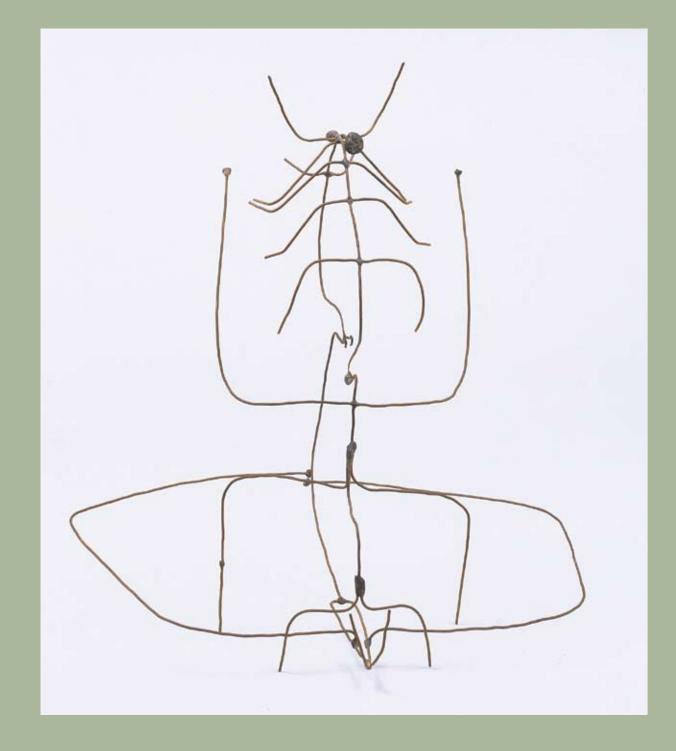
Her work is never easy. It wasn't easy to make. It isn't easy to analyze. It isn't easy to touch. And it was never predictable. It is a distinct aesthetic. From our current vantage point, the once bewildering variety of her work -- what seemed like (and was criticized as) wayward development -- now appears logical and sure. Today, taking its place in the history of art, Falkenstein's oeuvre remains one of the most challenging body of works from the 20th century.

Maren Henderson, Ph.D.

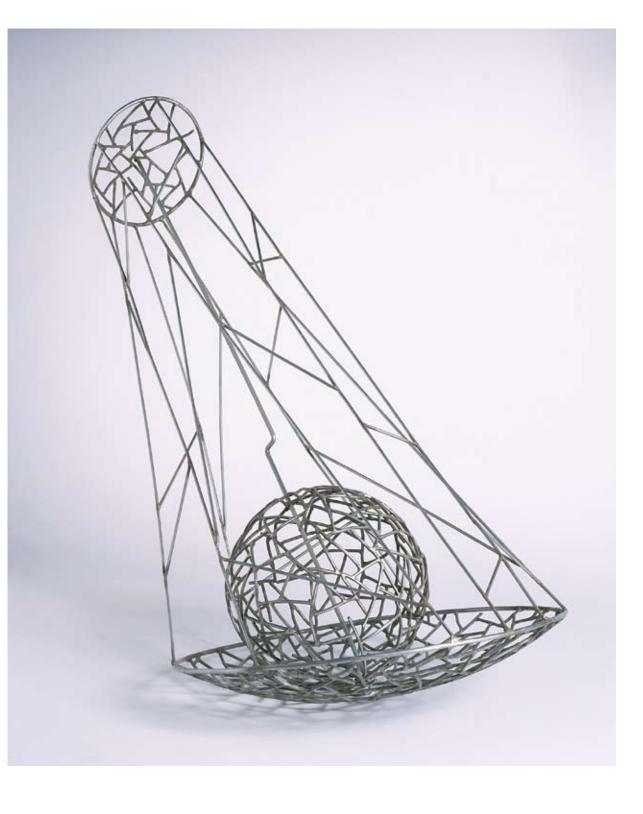


## 1. FIRST LEDA (MODEL FOR LEDA AND THE SWAN)

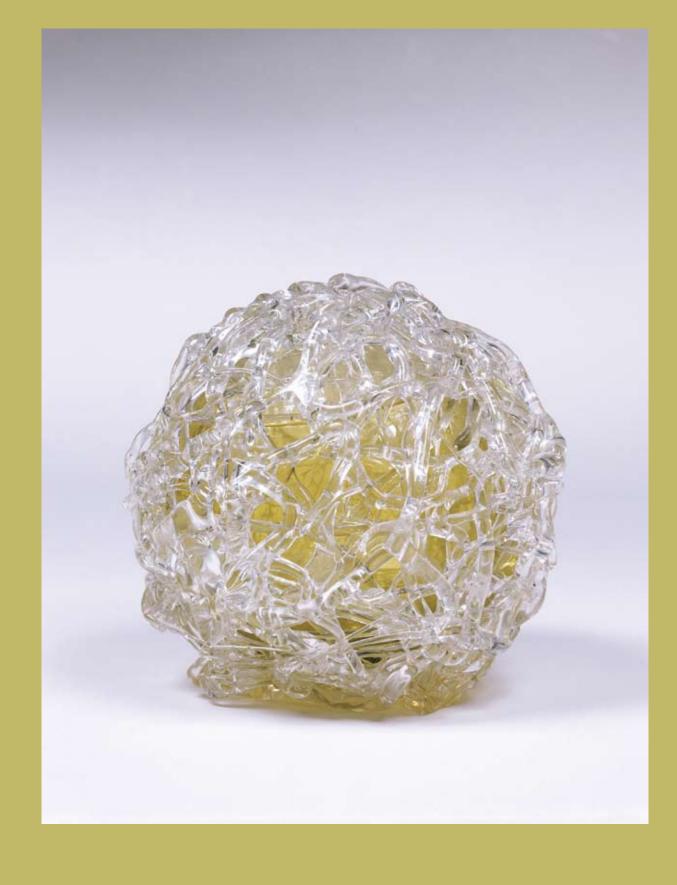
Paris, 1950 iron wire 14 x 13 x 9 inches 35.6 x 33 x 22.9 centimeters



circa 1950 stainless steel 31 x 24 x 14 inches 78.7 x 61 x 35.6 centimeters



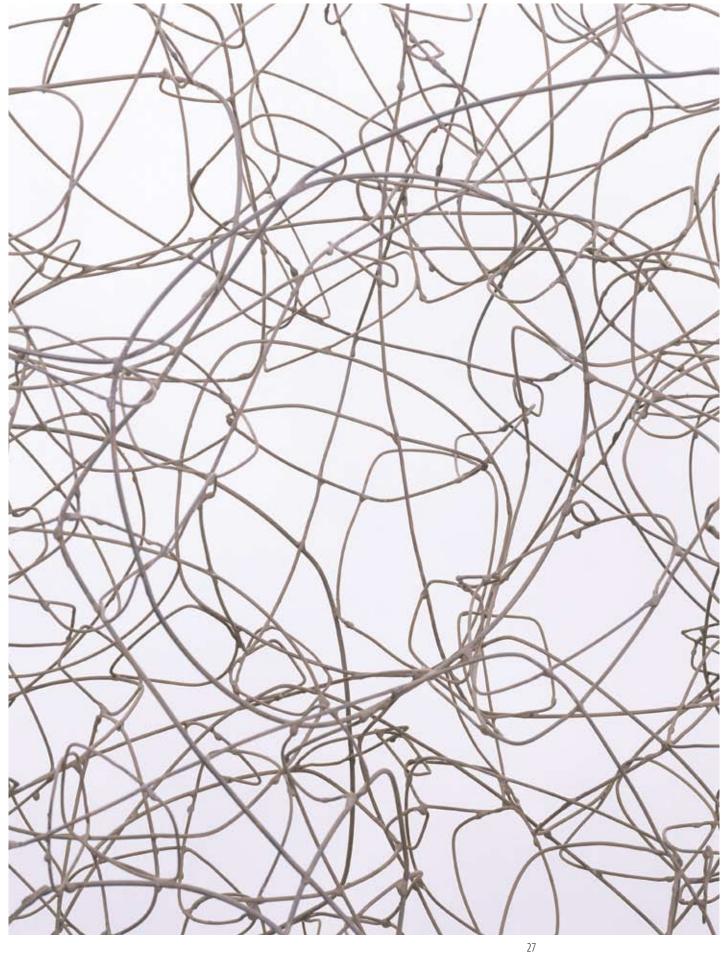
circa 1950 glass fused with blown glass 8 inches in diameter 20.4 centimeters in diameter

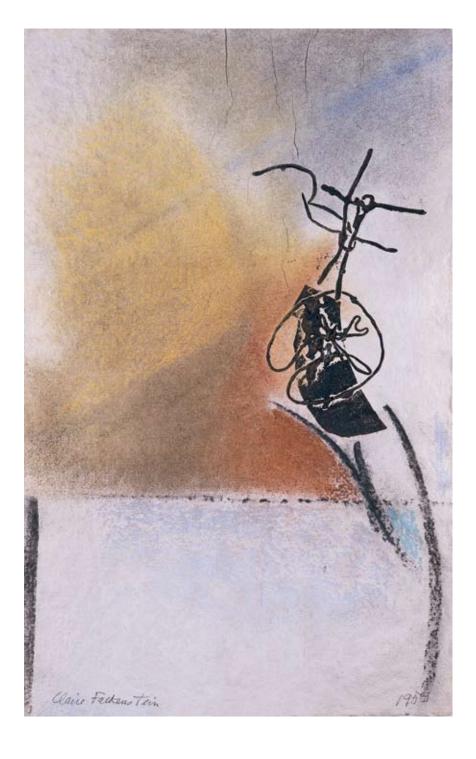




# 4. INTEGRATING RECTANGLE

1957 bronze wire 62 x 64 x 20 inches 157.5 x 162.6 x 50.8 centimeters



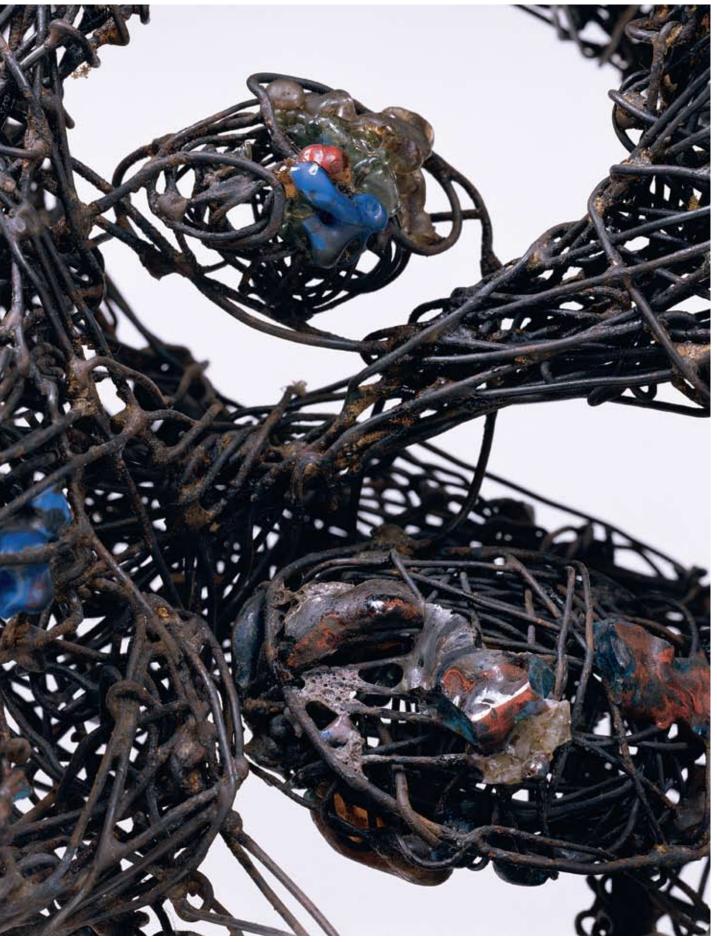


1958 graphic structure pastel on paper 18 x 11 inches 45.7 x 27.9 centimeters



# 6. MICHEL TAPIÉ--PORTRAIT

Paris, circa 1959 glass fused with bronze and gold 14 x 12 x 10 inches 35.6 x 30.5 x 25.4 centimeters





# 7. LADDER

paris, 1960 watercolor and felt tip pen on paper 13 x 10 inches 33 x 25.4 centimeters

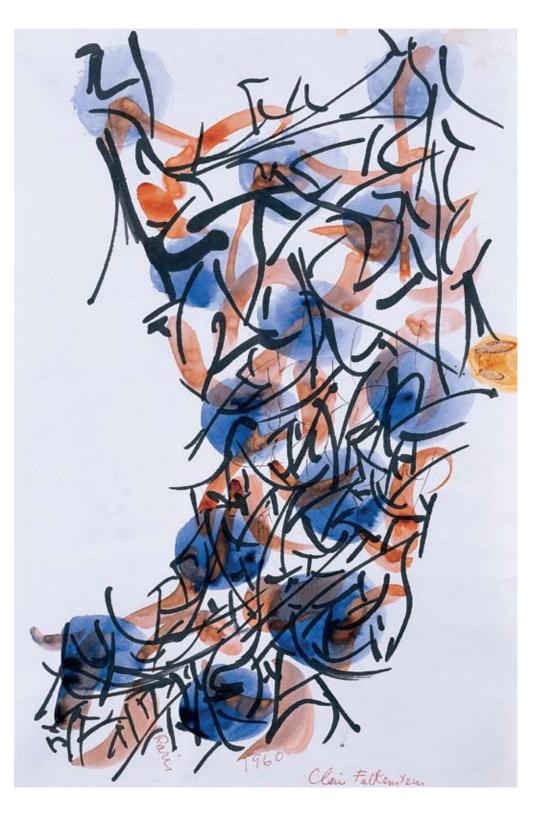


## 8. EXPLORATION

Paris, 1960 watercolor and felt tip pen on paper 13 x 10 inches 33 x 25.4 centimeters

# 9. SIGN & ENSEMBLE

Paris, 1960 watercolor and felt tip pen on paper 13 x 9 inches 33 x 22.9 centimeters



Paris, 1960 watercolor, ink & felt tip pen on paper 13 x 10 inches 33 x 25.4 centimeters





Paris, 1960 watercolor and felt tip pen on paper 13 1/8 x 10 3/8 inches 33.32 x 26.34 centimeters

### 12. LATTICE-- SUN

circa 1960 brazed copper wire 92 x 11 x 11 inches 233.7 x 27.9 x 27.9 centimeters

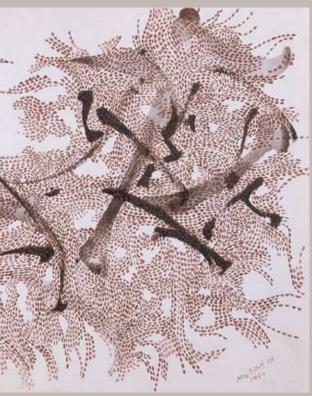




New York, 1960 ink and felt tip pen on paper 10 5/8 x 14 inches 27 x 35.6 centimeters



New York, 1960 watercolor, ink and felt tip pen on paper 14 x 10 5/8 inches 35.6 x 25.4 centimeters



#### 15. UNTITLED COMPOSITION

New York, 1960 watercolor and ink on paper 17 7/8 x 23 7/8 inches 45.39 x 60.63 centimeters



# 16. BODY CENTERED CUBIC

circa 1960 glass fused with gold and iron wire 29 x 29 x 29 inches 73.7 x 73.7 x 73.7 centimeters



1960 copper tubing 8 x 12 x 6 inches 20.3 x 30.5 x 15.2 centimeters



# 18. THE RIVER (STILL)

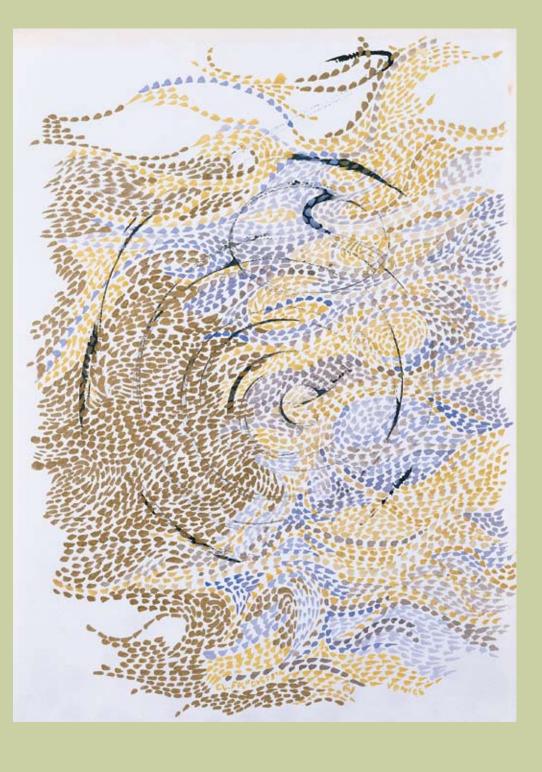
Rome, 1960 ink and gouache on paper 9 3/8 x 12 inches 23.80 x 30.5 centimeters



#### 19. SUN

1960-1961 copper wire and rods 30 x 75 x 38 inches 76.2 x 190.5 x 96.5 centimeters

Venice, 1961 watercolor, ink and felt tip pen on paper 14 x 10 5/8 inches 35.6 x 25.97 centimeters





New York, 1961 watercolor gouache on paper 17 7/8 x 23 7/8 inches 45.39 x 60.63 centimeters

circa 1962 soldered copper 7 x 8 1/2 x 6 inches 17.8 x 21.59 x 15.2 centimeters





#### 23. NEVER ENDING SCREEN (STRUTTURA GRAFICA)

1963 welded copper and gold 16 x 15 inches 40.6 x 38.1 centimeters



#### 24. VIBRAZIONE VENEZIA

1963 oil on canvas with steel and Venetian glass 55 x 79 inches 139.7 x 200.7 centimeters



# 25. NEVER ENDING SCREEN

circa 1963 welded steel and silver 18 x 12 inches 45.7 x 30.5 centimeters 65



#### 26. NEVER ENDING SCREEN

circa 1963 copper tubing 15 x 12 inches 38.1 x 30.5 centimeters

### 27. POINT AS A SET

1964 copper tubing 6 inches in diameter 15.2 centimeters in diameter





### 28. POINT AS A SET N-10

circa 1965 welded copper 34 inches in diameter 86.3 centimeters in diameter

# 29. NEVER ENDING SCREEN

circa 1965 copper with gold and silver paint 21 x 13 1/4 x 2 inches 53.3 x 33.7 x 5.1 centimeters





circa 1965 copper 15 x 40 x 5 inches 38.1 x 101.6 x 12.7 centimeters



# 31. NEVER ENDING SCREEN

circa 1968 iron 15 x 14 inches 38.1 x 35.6 centimeters



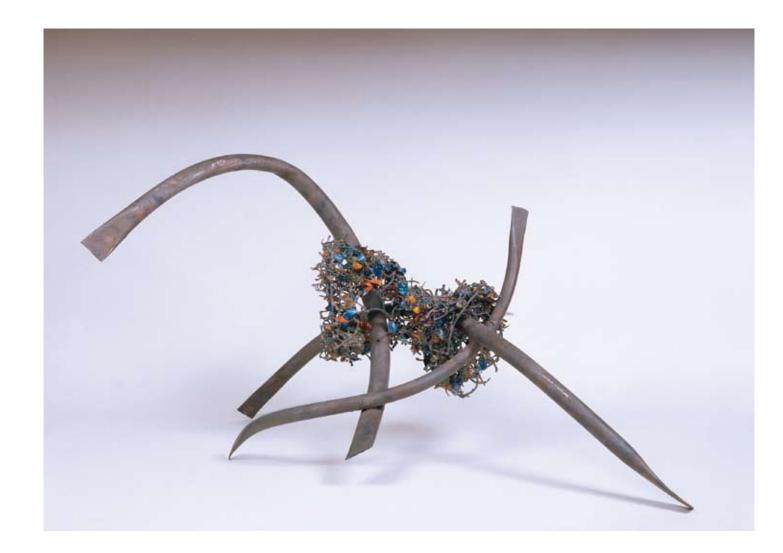
#### 32. NEVER ENDING SCREEN

circa 1968 gold over copper 16 x 17 inches 40.6 x 43.2 centimeters



#### 33. NEVER ENDING SCREEN

circa 1970 soldered copper 18 inches in diameter 45.7 centimeters in diameter



circa 1970 Venetian glass fused with copper 26 x 37 x 34 inches 66 x 94 x 86.4 centimeters



## 35. CHALICE

circa 1970 Venetian glass fused with metals 11 x 15 x 13 inches 27.9 x 38.1 x 33 centimeters



#### 36. STRUCTURE AND FLOW

circa 1970 copper tubing 28 x 33 x 23 inches 71.1 x 83.8 x 58.4 centimeters



### 37. UNTITLED (TOPOLOGICAL)

circa 1970 copper with rivets 8 x 9 x 11 inches 20.3 x 22.9 x 27.9 centimeters

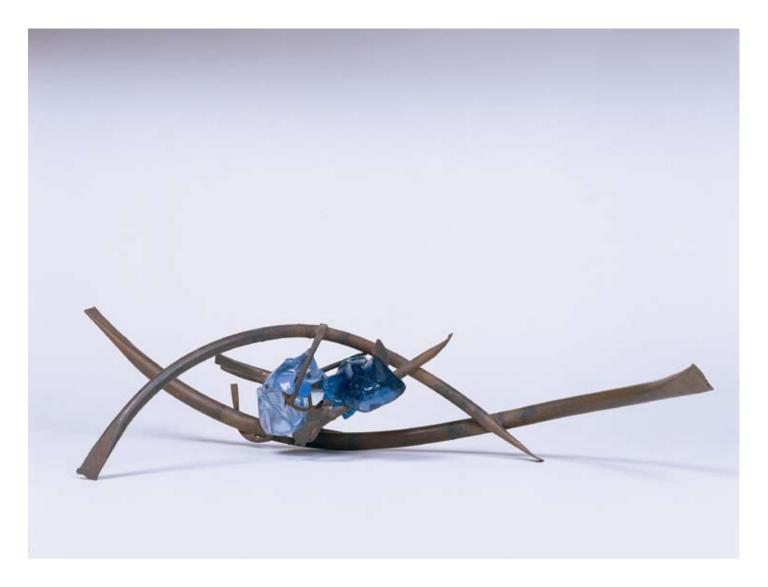




circa 1970 glass fused with copper 6 x 8 x 6 inches 15.2 x 20.3 x 15.2 centimeters

#### 39. UNTITLED COMPOSITION

circa 1970 glass fused with copper 11 x 16 x 17 inches 27.9 x 40.6 x 43.2 centimeters



#### 40. UNTITLED (FUSION)

circa 1970 glass fused with copper 7 x 30 x 14 inches 17.8 x 76.2 x 35.6 centimeters in diameter

# 41. NEVER ENDING SCREEN

circa 1970 copper tubing 11 x 16 inches 27.9 x 40.6 centimeters

